

July 20, 2000

**NPR Commentary:**

## **The Right to Keep and Bear Arms, as Understood by the Founding Fathers**

*Earlier this week, National Public Radio ran the following commentary on how the issue of guns affected the election held 200 years ago that gave us President Thomas Jefferson.*

National Public Radio (NPR)  
MORNING EDITION (11:00 AM on ET)  
July 17, 2000, Monday

BOB EDWARDS, host:

As the November election approaches, Vice President Al Gore and the Democrats are pushing for stronger gun control laws. Texas Governor George W. Bush and fellow Republicans tend to support tougher enforcement of existing laws. Commentator Richard Rosenfeld reminds us that gun control has been an issue since the nation's first-turn-of-the-century election, though not in the same way.

RICHARD ROSENFELD:

The control of arms was an important issue in the election of 1800 because only a year earlier, in the spring of 1799, the nation's second president, John Adams, had unleashed his brand-new federal army into the Pennsylvania countryside purportedly to enforce new tax laws. But that federal force invaded the homes of German-speaking families who had been critical of John Adams' administration, tore down symbols of their political opposition, terrorized men, women and children alike, and publicly whipped newspaper editors who reported the army's misconduct.

Reaction to the federal government's misuse of force in 1799 was akin to recent public concerns about the possible misuse of federal force in Waco, Texas. The army's misconduct cost John Adams dearly in his presidential re-election bid in 1800. In Adams' words, "That army was as unpopular as if it had been a ferocious wild beast let loose upon the nation to devour it."

Americans had been wary about arms in the hands of the government from the time of their independence from England and even before. They remembered 17th century British kings who had used government armies to keep the people in fear and had used restrictive hunting laws to keep the people without arms and therefore powerless against them.

So while America's founders built many checks and balances against the misuse of power into the new United States Constitution, they all agreed that the ultimate check against possible government tyranny would be an armed American population. Thomas Jefferson, Mr. Adams' Democratic challenger in the presidential election of 1800, was also distrustful of arms in the hands of the federal government. He felt that in a republic, the government should be in awe of the people, not the other way around.

So after he won the presidency from Adams in 1800, Jefferson substantially reduced the size of the federal army. And he continued to champion America's first federal gun control regulation, which is the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, the article of the Bill of Rights which reminds us that power starts and stays with the American people. And that while requiring gun ownership to be safe and responsible, the federal government must not infringe, in the words of that amendment, on "the right of the people to keep and bear arms."

EDWARDS: The comments of Richard Rosenfeld, whose book "American Aurora: A Democratic-Republican Returns," recounts the ideological battles of the early American republic.

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